What do cartoonists do?

1. Discuss what it is about this cartoon that the judges might have appreciated. You could consider such criteria as style, wit, context, message, etc.

1.2 What is your opinion of it?

Curriculum Guide
This article is relevant to students in a variety of curriculum areas:
- Politics
- Australian Studies
- Discovering Democracy
- Society and Environment (Culture and Identity)
- Media Studies
- English

It will help them to analyse representations, and to consider the impact of political cartoons on Australian democracy.

The National Museum of Australia at Acton opened in March 2001 as part of the celebrations for the Centenary of Federation. The Museum employs a fresh and exciting approach to Australian history, culture and environment. Each National Museum unit of work in STUDIES asks students to consider the stories and concepts behind Museum themes, objects and images, and can be used with students in Society and Environment, History, Geography, English and Media Studies.

For the last seven years the National Museum of Australia has presented an exhibition of the year's best cartoons. This article looks at some of the cartoons in the 2003 exhibition, and provides ways of critically analysing as well as enjoying some of those cartoons. It also enables students to think about the impact of cartoons on Australian democracy — are they a positive element that makes our democracy stronger, or do they undermine that democracy by constant criticism and negativism?

Each year the Australian Journalists’ Association presents its Walkley Awards. One of the categories is ‘best cartoon’. The cartoon below is the 2003 winner.

1.1 Discuss what it is about this cartoon that the judges might have appreciated. You could consider such criteria as style, wit, context, message, etc.

1.2 What is your opinion of it?

Not Happy John!
Mark Knight
Herald Sun
4 June 2003

You may or may not agree that this cartoon is particularly good. If you disagree, perhaps it is because you do not understand the context of the cartoon.

Here is some information that will help you.

When Prime Minister John Howard told his treasurer, Peter Costello, that he would not be stepping down as PM after his 64th birthday, Mark Knight said the look of disappointment was there for all to see. The subsequent story required a cartoon that conveyed the treasurer’s mood simply and quickly. Knight drew on the phrase that had recently become part of the language thanks to a popular television commercial.

JUDGES’ COMMENTS: Deft, absolutely accurate on the day and a good adaptation of a popular gagline — we all laughed. Knight takes an image we all know and makes it funny. Very strong execution. It’s just a hoot.

www.walkleys.com/2003/winners/knight.htm
To appreciate this cartoon therefore you needed to know:

- who is in the cartoon (Peter Costello, Treasurer and Deputy Leader of the Liberal Party)
- the immediate context (the news that the Prime Minister had decided against retiring)
- the broader context (the Treasurer’s ambition and expectation that he would take over when the Prime Minister retired; the possibility that the long-awaited announcement would be that he had decided to retire; and the recognition of the phrase ‘Not happy, Jan!’ as popularised in a TV advertisement).

1.3 Revise or add to the criteria that you used to evaluate this cartoon.

1.4 Imagine that you had to draw a cartoon in response to this issue. Sketch one, or describe in words how you would present it to the readers of your newspaper that day.

Cartoons 1B – 1E show four other cartoonists’ responses to that issue. Cartoon 1B and 1D were actually published on the same day as the Knight cartoon.

1.5 Do you agree with the Walkley judges that the Knight cartoon was the best depiction of this event? Explain your reasons.

‘Reading’ cartoons
Each cartoon depends on a number of elements to create its overall impression. These are:

- caricature
- tone
- use of symbols
- values

which, when put together, deliver the final messages that the cartoonist wants to influence you with. Let’s see how they work for these five cartoons.

**CARICATURE:** A caricature is a deliberate distortion or over-emphasis of some physical feature of a person to identify them.

Compare the way the people are depicted in the five cartoons.

1.6 What features of Peter Costello and John Howard are emphasised and caricatured?

1.7 Do the caricatures create a particular impression of the person?

**SYMBOLS:** Cartoonists often use symbols to help get ideas across.

Look at the crown on Prime Minister Howard’s head in Cartoon 1D.

1.8 What is that meant to symbolise?

Look at the background in Cartoon 1E.

1.9 What is that meant to symbolise?

**TONE:** Cartoons also have a tone, which reflects the attitude of the cartoonist to the people, ideas or events being shown. For example, a cartoon may be good-natured, savage, mocking, sympathetic, and so on.

1.10 Describe the tone of each of the cartoons, and rank them from most sympathetic to least sympathetic. Discuss why you decided on this order.

**VALUES:** Cartoonists also often express their own values in a cartoon.

Look at Cartoon 1B. The cartoonist, Geoff Pryor, is attacking what he sees as self-interest here.*

1.11 How does he do that?

*You can see an interview with Geoff Pryor on this and other issues at www.schools.nma.gov.au/resources

**MESSAGES:** Cartoons do not only summarise a news item. Often they carry messages, ideas and judgements that the cartoonist is making about the event or people or institutions involved.

1.12 What are the messages in each of these five cartoons? Write a short summary of the message under each cartoon. For example, you might decide for Cartoon 1A that the message is: Peter Costello is frustrated by his failure to achieve his ambition.

You have now seen five cartoonists responding to the same issue.

1.13 What, according to the cartoonists, are the main implications of the issue being depicted?
What other possible aspects could they have focused on — for example, could they have focused on the age of the Prime Minister, or the qualities of Peter Costello as a successor, or the reaction of other potential successors in the Liberal Party, or the impact on the people of Australia?

Why do you think the cartoonists might have focused on the aspects they did?

Do you think cartoonists are likely to give you an insight into politics?

You can explore these ideas further by looking at how a number of cartoonists nation-wide responded to the same issue, Australia Day 2004. Go to www.schools.nma.gov.au/resources. Cartoonists often respond to the main issue in the day's news. One of the main issues in Australia during 2003 was involvement in the war against Iraq. The curator of the Behind the Lines exhibition sums up the background to the issue and cartoonists' responses to it in this way:

**The case for war**

In the lead-up to war, various reasons were put forward to justify the invasion of Iraq. The Government argued that Saddam Hussein needed to be ousted because he was a dangerous dictator who supported terrorism and allegedly possessed weapons of mass destruction. The war was just because the Iraqi people would be liberated, establishing a bridgehead for democracy in the Middle East. Critics rejected these arguments, claiming that the primary cause was a struggle for control of the world's oil supply. Cartoonists cast a sceptical eye over the case for war.

Here is how six cartoons in the Behind the Lines exhibition depicted the issues involved in going to war.

**What's in this one?**

Simone Kneebone
Walkley Magazine
Winter 2003

**Pathology**

Phil Somerville
Nexus magazine
June/July 2003
2.1 Look at each of the cartoons, and apply these questions to it:

- Who or what is shown in the cartoon?
- How are they depicted?
- Are there any symbols in the cartoon?
- What is the tone of the cartoon?
- What are the values of the cartoonist that are being suggested?
- What is the cartoon’s message?

2.2 If you ONLY had these cartoons as evidence of what the war was about, what would you say?

2.3 None of the cartoons represented here, and none of the 14 cartoons in this section of the exhibition from which these six are drawn, supports the war using the arguments outlined in the curator’s introduction on page 3. Is that a problem? Discuss your ideas.

2.4 The curator of the exhibition says that the cartoonists are ‘casting a sceptical eye’ over the issue. What are the strengths and weaknesses of these cartoons in helping Australian people know how to respond to the war?

2.5 Do you think cartoonists have helped or harmed the democratic system in the ways they have depicted the issue? Discuss your reasons.

3 Representing leaders

Another area where cartoonists focus their skills and potentially have a lot of influence on people’s attitudes is in the depiction of Australian leaders.

The curator of the Behind the Lines exhibition says that:

-one of the main weapons in the cartoonist’s armoury is caricature.

[The cartoons on display under this heading] dissect our leaders’ personalities, highlighting their weaknesses and strengths, while commenting on the political and social settings in which they operate.

www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/behind_the_lines/leaders/

Look at the four cartoons of the main leader shown in the collection, Prime Minister John Howard.
3.1 Look at each of the cartoons, and apply these questions to it:
• **Who or what** is shown in the cartoon?
• **How** are they depicted?
• Are there any **symbols** in the cartoon?
• What is the tone of the cartoon?
• What are the **values** of the cartoonist that are being suggested?
• What is the cartoon’s **message**?

3.2 What are the strengths of the leader, and what are his weaknesses, as presented in each cartoon?

Cartoons can be vicious. Here are two savage caricatures of political leaders.

3.3 How does the cartoonist achieve such a strong image in each case?

3.4 All commentators agree that a main ‘weapon’ or ‘tool’ of the cartoonist is caricature. Do you think caricaturing political leaders is a desirable and effective approach? What benefits, and what costs, might it have?
Cartoonists often produce comments on Australia’s political institutions — such as political parties, parliament and the election process. One of these institutions, the Governor-General, was a focus of attention early in 2003.

On 25 May 2003 the Right Reverend Dr Peter Hollingworth resigned as Governor-General of Australia. Dr Hollingworth cited his concern about the impact of continuing controversy over his handling of sexual abuse allegations in his previous role as Archbishop of Brisbane. He then advised the Prime Minister that he could no longer continue in the office of Governor-General. Cartoonists mused on the demise of Australia’s head of state and the Prime Minister’s powers to appoint and dismiss the Governor-General.

Look at these five cartoons in response to that issue.

4A Representing political institutions: the Governor General

Governor-General Adrift
Paul Newman
Australian
2003

Job Interview
Jon Kudelka
Hobart Mercury
31 May 2003

G...O. G...G. GO
Mark Knight
Herald Sun
2003

One More Blow for the Crown
John Tiedemann
Sunday Telegraph
1 June 2003

Look at these five cartoons in response to that issue.
During 2003, cartoonists also focused heavily on the nature of the Australian-American alliance during the Iraq War. Australia’s participation in the invasion of Iraq confirmed, once again, our close relationship with the United States. Public debate raged over the benefits and problems of the alliance. Cartoonists found an abundance of colourful metaphors* with which to explore Australia’s special relationship with its powerful friend.

*The Macquarie Dictionary describes a metaphor as a figure of speech in which a term or phrase is applied to something which is not literally applicable, in order to suggest a resemblance. For example, ‘The Prime Minister steered the ship of state through the year’.

Look at the eight cartoons on the next pages in response to that issue.

www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/behind_the_lines/a_powerful_friend/
5.1 Look at each of the cartoons, and apply these questions to it:
- **Who or what** is shown in the cartoon?
- **How** are they depicted?
- Are there any **symbols** in the cartoon?
- What is the **tone** of the cartoon?
- What are the **values** of the cartoonist that are being suggested?
- What is the cartoon's **message**?

5.2 The cartoonists rely heavily on symbolism in these cartoons. Discuss the main symbols used, and decide whether you think they are effective and powerful symbols.

5.3 Can you suggest other symbols that could have been used to represent Australia and the United States in cartoons on this issue?

5.4 There is no variety of attitude offered by cartoonists on this image — every one is critical of what they see as the nature of the Australian involvement in the alliance. Is that a problem for readers? Discuss your views.

6. **Representing a difficult case: the Bali bombing**

Cartoonists say that they have problems dealing with some issues. One of these was the Bali bombing and its aftermath, with the first anniversary of the event on 12 October 2003 and the trial of several of the accused.

Imagine that you were asked to create a cartoon about the event.

6.1 Sketch one, or describe in words how you would present it to the readers of your newspaper that day. Decide what ideas or elements you will focus on, and what the message of the cartoon will be.

6.2 Did you have difficulties with this task? Discuss why you did or did not.

The *Behind the Lines* exhibition has two cartoons that are relevant to this event.

6.3 Look at each of the cartoons, and apply these questions to it:
- **Who or what** is shown in the cartoon?
- **How** are they depicted?
- Are there any **symbols** in the cartoon?
- What is the **tone** of the cartoon?
- What are the **values** of the cartoonist that are being suggested?
- What is the cartoon's **message**?

6.4 Why would this be a difficult issue for cartoonists to deal with?
The 'target' of a cartoon is, in the end, the viewer. Sometimes cartoonists make the viewer not only the target, but also the subject. Look at these six cartoons and consider what each cartoonist is saying about us, the Australian viewer.

7.1 Look at each of the cartoons, and apply these questions to it:
- **Who or what** is shown in the cartoon?
- **How** are they depicted?
- Are there any **symbols** in the cartoon?
- What is the **tone** of the cartoon?
- What are the **values** of the cartoonist that are being suggested?
- What is the cartoon's **message**?

7.2 Why would a cartoonist 'target' a viewer?

7.3 Do any of these cartoons have an impact on you? Explain your reasons.
You have now studied 38 cartoons in this article. You therefore have a large ‘data bank’ to call on in considering a final set of comments about the nature and impact of cartoons.

8.1 Here is a collection of comments. Decide in each case if you basically agree or disagree with each, and select one cartoon that best illustrates your opinion on each statement. So, if you agree with a statement, select the cartoon that best illustrates that view; if you disagree with a statement, select the cartoon that best negates that comment, and represents your opposite point of view.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STATEMENT ABOUT CARTOONS</th>
<th>AGREE</th>
<th>DISAGREE</th>
<th>BEST CARTOON</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[A cartoon] provokes people into thinking again about an issue … I am … interested in affecting the people in the middle, the swinging voter if you like.</td>
<td><img src="https://example.com/cartoon1.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="https://example.com/cartoon2.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="https://example.com/cartoon3.png" alt="Image" /></td>
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<td>Cartoonist Bruce Petty, Good Weekend Magazine, 13 July 2002, pp. 16, 19</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>[Cartoonists] skewer the pomposity, the glib rhetoric, and the deliberate lies of our political elites.</td>
<td><img src="https://example.com/cartoon4.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="https://example.com/cartoon5.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="https://example.com/cartoon6.png" alt="Image" /></td>
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<tr>
<td>Russ Radcliffe, Best Australian Political Cartoons 2003, Scribe Publications, Melbourne, 2003</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>[Cartoons] give such an unrelievedly bleak picture of politicians and the whole political process. I started to think about the impact of cartoons on the popular perception of Australian politics, and I was a little disturbed by what I was thinking. The problem is not with individual cartoons. No, the problem comes from a steady diet, week after week, and year after year, of images of politicians as liars, cheats, compromisers and fools. Whereas other mass media journalists are expected to report fairly objectively and without bias, there is no such expectation for cartoonists. When I speak of bias here I don’t mean a preference for the Liberal Party or the Labor Party. Most cartoonists make no distinction here. No, what I mean by bias here is that virtually all the images of politicians and politics are negative. It is almost impossible to find a cartoon that says something positive about politics.</td>
<td><img src="https://example.com/cartoon7.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="https://example.com/cartoon8.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="https://example.com/cartoon9.png" alt="Image" /></td>
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<td>[My cartoons are] just a jumble of ideas and questions that I’ve got about a situation, put together in a way that sort of conveys the story. I’m trying not to illustrate the news, but ask some questions about what’s going on.</td>
<td><img src="https://example.com/cartoon10.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="https://example.com/cartoon11.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="https://example.com/cartoon12.png" alt="Image" /></td>
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<tr>
<td>Cartoonist David Rowe in Libby Tuckbell, Hired Assassins Study Guide, ATOM, Melbourne, 2003</td>
<td></td>
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<td>A cartoon is ‘looking under and behind the surface of events, reading between the lines, unravelling the spin doctors’ spinning’.</td>
<td><img src="https://example.com/cartoon13.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="https://example.com/cartoon14.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="https://example.com/cartoon15.png" alt="Image" /></td>
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<td>Cartoonist Cathy Wilcox, Good Weekend Magazine, 13 July 2002, p. 17</td>
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<td>Cartoonists confront people with little bits of truth … [that are] sometimes funnier than the lies the politicians sell.</td>
<td><img src="https://example.com/cartoon16.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="https://example.com/cartoon17.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="https://example.com/cartoon18.png" alt="Image" /></td>
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<td>Cartoonist Bill Leak in Libby Tuckbell, Hired Assassins Study Guide, ATOM, Melbourne, 2003</td>
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<td>Cartoonists make democracy bearable.</td>
<td><img src="https://example.com/cartoon19.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="https://example.com/cartoon20.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="https://example.com/cartoon21.png" alt="Image" /></td>
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<td>Drawing a cartoon is a way of expressing my anger and hopefully at the same time making other people angry about it.</td>
<td><img src="https://example.com/cartoon22.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="https://example.com/cartoon23.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="https://example.com/cartoon24.png" alt="Image" /></td>
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<tr>
<td>Cartoonist Phil Somerville, Good Weekend Magazine, 13 July 2002, p. 17</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I don’t think it really matters if you’re a left-wing cartoonist or a right-wing cartoonist, as long as you make your point clearly and in a hard-hitting way, you’ve got the potential there to make people think.</td>
<td><img src="https://example.com/cartoon25.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="https://example.com/cartoon26.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="https://example.com/cartoon27.png" alt="Image" /></td>
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<tr>
<td>I suppose it is traditional that political cartoonists take on people with power in the community. There is now even more important, more anonymous, figures who run our global, corporate world. These non-elected people decide more than politicians what goes on and make decisions where all our wealth and the wealth of this country goes. We [cartoonists] keep drawing politicians but the real power is often with a different set of people.</td>
<td><img src="https://example.com/cartoon28.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="https://example.com/cartoon29.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="https://example.com/cartoon30.png" alt="Image" /></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
8.2 What do you now see as the strengths and weaknesses of cartoons?

8.3 How would you characterise or describe cartoons — are they thoughtful, politically incisive analyses and evaluations; or are they shallow slogans, a knee-jerk reaction to an issue — the newspaper equivalent of the political ‘doorstop’ interview?

8.4 Do you think that cartoons are a vital part of our democracy, or are they undermining it?

Activities

Here are some ways of following up many of the issues raised in this unit.

8.5 There is an assumption in the unit that cartoons really do influence people. But do they? Some issues to consider might include:

- Who ‘reads’ cartoons?
- Do cartoons influence people more than the articles in a newspaper (which are usually more balanced)?
- What if different cartoons present different ideas on the same day?

How could you test this?

8.6 In question 8.4 you considered whether cartoons help or harm a democracy and formulated a point of view or hypothesis. Below are two other exercises you can carry out to test this hypothesis further.

- Collect as many political cartoons as you can in a week. If possible, collect them from several different newspapers and magazines. Do they support the argument for ‘healthy satire’, or for ‘destructive cynicism’?
- Devise a questionnaire that surveys people’s response to cartoons, and the influence cartoons have on them. Your survey needs to consider such elements as:
  - How often people see political cartoons?
  - Do the cartoons influence them?
  - Are people more or less influenced by other political opinions, such as those of articles or commentators?

When you have agreed on the questions for the class survey, test as many people as you can. Then pool your results and analyse them. To help you analyse the results more fully, you may need to include discriminators in your survey such as:

- age
- gender
- types of newspapers read
- amount of political news or comments seen to help you analyse results more fully.

Resources

Cartoonist Michael Leunig reflects on the life of a cartoonist.


Nicholson cartoons.

www.nicholsoncartoons.com.au


STATEMENT ABOUT CARTOONS

The cartoonist’s pen can be a devastating weapon that pricks pomposity in the powerful and evokes sympathy for the exploited and downtrodden.

Libby Tudball, Hired Assassins Study Guide, ATOM, Melbourne, 2003

The reason why Australian cartoonists do so well around the world is that they aren’t afraid to take on the established order of things … Our national characteristic of egalitarianism is tailor-made for political cartooning.


There are plenty out there who think a cartoonist does a funny gag which helps you get through the editorial and gives you a bit of light relief after the gloom and horror of all the news . . . I’d say, when you get to the editorial page [and] you see the cartoon, have a good chortle, feel a bit better … My view is that cartoons are political comment, only a cartoonist does it in pictures rather than words. But it’s essentially just as politically informed, or should be, as [a column by an expert political commentator].


You’re the voice of the people, you’re part of the thought processing of people, you can also be part of the healing process of the community, you’re an advocate . . . you’re the person who’s going back through the political script, and you’re selling certain phrases or sentences that have relevance to the community or the reader.

Cartoonist Rod Emmerson in Libby Tudball, Hired Assassins Study Guide, ATOM, Melbourne, 2003

STOP PRESS

The cartoon voted Best Political Satire in the 2003 Behind The Lines exhibition was Cartoon 7A on page 10.